

Abolish Long-Term Solitary Confinement: It's A Threat To The Public.

By: Joseph Dole

I have a very intimate understanding of the effects of long-term isolation on a person's mental and physical health. An entire decade of my life was spent involuntarily entombed in isolation at the notorious Tamms Supermax Prison in southern Illinois.

Serving a sentence of life-without-parole, I was sent to Tamms for knocking out an assistant warden in yet another Illinois prison where humans are simply warehoused without any programs, with few jobs, and where we were constantly disrespected and dehumanized by staff and administrators alike. In retaliation for that assault, I was likewise assaulted while in handcuffs by several staff members who broke my nose and did other damage, prior to shipping me off to Tamms.

Tamms was allegedly opened as a sort of "shock-treatment" for violent inmates and gang leaders. If the inmate behaved he was supposed to be transferred out after a year. This never occurred though. The reality was that, once opened, the IDOC administration abused their power and used Tamms to mete out retaliation. Not just against staff-assaulters either, it included jailhouse lawyers and many of the mentally ill whom the administration wished to lock in a closet somewhere.

In the ten years I was there, I never received a single legitimate disciplinary infraction. Nonetheless, I was denied a transfer out of Tamms 39 times. Upon arrival, and for the next 7 or 8 years, I was repeatedly, and gleefully, told that I would never be released from indeterminate disciplinary segregation, would never get out of Tamms, and would, in fact, die alone of old age

in that concrete box. I was 26 at the time. To get their point across, I was forced to send out all property not allowed at Tamms, because I was assured I would never see another prison where I could possess it.

While at Tamms, I not only studied all of the available literature on solitary confinement, but also observed how isolation affected both myself and the inmates around me, as well as those who partook in isolating us.

For nearly the first three years, I was denied a television or radio. Thus, I spent every waking hour reading, writing, cleaning, or working out in order to try to maintain my sanity. Nevertheless, by year five, I was experiencing auditory hallucinations (thinking I heard someone calling my name), extreme anxiety, erratic heart palpitations, and severe bouts of depression. All of which are direct consequences of long-term solitary confinement, and which would get increasingly worse as the years wore on.

Luckily, those were the extent of the mental and physical repercussions of being isolated for so long. Well, that is, if you don't count the atrophy of my eyesight, hearing, social skills, and a number of my relationships with family members and friends. I say lucky, because it could have been much worse.

I went to Tamms bloody, but without any mental illness, so I was able to withstand its effects for longer than those who arrived mentally ill. Had I been bipolar, schizophrenic, or even ~~just~~ illiterate, who knows what would have happened? Imagine being trapped behind a steel door for years on end with no television or radio, unable to read or write, with no one to teach you and absolutely nothing to do. (For many this is a daily reality).

I may have ended up cutting or biting off chunks of my skin like many

did while I was there. Or, I may have killed myself or attempted to, like so many others I know. Or, it may have been another inmate watching CO Bundgren carry off my severed penis, instead of the other way around. Who knows? Fortunately for me, none of that happened to me, I survived intact. Many others don't.

I know that many Americans feel that I got what I deserved. (We Americans have perfected both being sanctimonious and deliberately indifferent to the plight of others). While I can agree that I deserved to be punished for my actions, at a certain point (after my nose was broken in my opinion) the isolation ceased being about punishment or even "institutional security," and just became a sadistic display of an abuse of power.

The public may not care for my well-being, nor that of the 100,000 Americans who are currently being held in long-term isolation, but they should. Through their indifference, the public is directly responsible for the torture of their fellow citizens, the deterioration of their mental health, and all of the suicides that occur in isolation units (which account for one-half to two-thirds of all prison suicides).

Moreover, they are responsible for the effects these facilities have on the people who work there, as well as the threat these places pose to society at large.

People who work in isolation units are severely affected by their work brutalizing people on a daily basis. Not only do they have higher rates of alcoholism and spousal abuse as a result, but their average life expectancy rate is 20 years less than the average citizen. They become accustomed to being above the law and able to abuse people at will, and then bring that attitude home to their family and community.

Control units and supermaxes are also extremely expensive, siphoning limited resources

away from things that actually protect society, like rehabilitation programs, police and fire departments, and schools (better educated people are also more law-abiding). Then there's the additional court costs of all of the lawsuits isolation units generate.

These places make people so irrationally angry that it is the height of folly to continue operating them, and even more so to then release people straight to the streets from them. No example of this is more demonstrative of that than Evan Ebel. He was a mentally ill man who was sentenced to 8 years in prison in Colorado for carjacking, and ended up spending the entire 8 years in solitary confinement. His mental health steadily deteriorated the entire time,

Prior to release, Ebel filed a grievance asking "do you have any obligation to the public to reacclimate me, the dangerous inmate, to being around other human beings prior to release, and, if not, why?" The arbitrary written response he received was that a grievance was not the appropriate place to discuss policy.

Within two months of being released straight to the streets, Ebel would kill a pizza delivery man after having him read a statement condemning solitary confinement; wear the man's uniform to the home of the Director of the Colorado Department of Corrections whom he would shoot to death; and then get into two shootouts with police before dying of gunshot wounds.

This did not surprise me at all when I read about it. I witnessed countless people grow angrier and angrier, year after year, due to being arbitrarily isolated and brutalized. In the 8 years total that I've spent in general population around thousands of different men, I've never witnessed anyone become a muslim extremist. However, in the decade I spent in Tamms around just a few hundred men, I listened as many did so, and then listened to them expound on their hatred of America and the West in rants

that would last for days.

Solitary confinement units are incubators of hate. Which is completely understandable. Treat people inhumanely long enough, and not only will they cease to view you as humane, but some may want to return the favor.

The good news is that many people are finally, belatedly, starting to realize all of this. In January of this year alone, both Indiana and California settled lawsuits by promising to severely curb their use of long-term isolation, and President Obama ordered the Bureau of Prisons to do so as well.

Control units and supermax prisons are the most widely abused "tool" in corrections departments across the country. While the above-mentioned reforms are welcome, they will barely put a dent in the number of people being abused in solitary confinement around the country, including Guantánamo Bay.

Tamms wasn't closed quickly enough to save hundreds of us from years of torture and its ill effects. Nor did Colorado reform its use of solitary confinement in time to save the community from being victimized by Evan Ebel. For everyone's sake, let's hope more states choose to accelerate reforms instead of fight them.

(March 2016)

Joseph Dole is the author of "A Costly American Hatred" (<https://createspace.com/5003773>) and the upcoming "Control Units And Supermaxes: A National Security Threat." Check out more of his work at <https://www.facebook.com/JosephDoleIncarceratedWriter> or contact him directly at

Joseph Dole K84446
Stateville Correctional Center
P.O. Box 112
Joliet, IL 60434
U.S.A.